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ABSTRACT

Most research in the area of attack-instigated aggression has examined the effect that different types and intensities of attacks have on promoting counteraggressive responses. Little research has been designed to identify why individuals counteraggress in response to attack or what can be done to deter attack victims from counteraggressive behaviors. An experiment was conducted to test the major propositions of power restoration theory, which has addressed both issues. College students were assigned to one of six conditions in a two (attack vs. no-attack) by three (relevant vs. irrelevant vs. zero power enhancement) factorial design. Results supported the hypothesis that the purpose of counteraggression is power enhancement, relative to the aggressor. Subjects were found to be less aggressive when they were given power over their provocateur than when they were given power over a third party or were given no power enhancement. The findings provide support for the power restoration theory. (Author/JAC)

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COUNTERAGGRESSION: ITS CAUSES AND PREVENTION

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Counteraggression: its causes and prevention

Problem

It is well-documented in the empirical literature that attacks elicit aggressive responses (see Baron, 1977 for a review). To date, most of the research in the area of attack-instigated aggression has examined the effect that different types and intensities of attacks have on promoting counteraggressive responses (e.g. Epstein and Taylor, 1967; Shortell, Epstein, and Taylor, 1970). In contrast, very little research has been aimed at identifying why individuals counter-aggress in response to attack, or what can be done to deter attack victims from counteraggressing (Taylor and Pisano, 1971; Baron, 1973; 1977; S. Worchel, Arnold, and Harrison, 1978). The present experiment was conducted to test the major propositions of a theory, i.e. power restoration theory, which has addressed both of these issues.

According to power restoration theory (Horowitz, 1956) each individual has a legitimate amount of power within a given social environment. When an individual is attacked, his or her power is reduced. Since power begets satisfaction, an individual is motivated to restore his or her power to its pre-attack level. This can be accomplished by counteraggressing. That is, an individual can achieve his or her power restoration goal by engaging in activities that enhance his or her power, relative to the attack instigator. Counteraggression is posited to be among a class of activities that has this potential.

Very little research has been conducted to test the propositions of power restoration theory (Horowitz and Goldman, 1954; Horowitz, Goldman, and Lee, 1954; S. Worchel, Arnold, and Harrison, 1978). Furthermore, the few empirical investigations that have been performed have yielded, due to methodological deficiencies, inconclusive findings (for a critique see P. Worchel, 1960; Fagenson, 1981).

The purpose of the present experiment was to provide a precise and valid test of the theory's propositions. The hypothesis that individuals counteraggress to enhance their power relative to the attack instigator's position was the central focus of the investigation. This hypothesis was tested by examining the extent to which subjects aggressed after they had or had not been verbally attacked and had been given either power over their aggressor (i.e. relevant power), no power enhancement (i.e. zero power enhancement), or power over an individual with whom they had never interacted, (i.e. irrelevant power). It was predicted that if counteraggression corresponds to a need to enhance power relative to the attack instigator, then an individual's level of counteraggression should be reduced to the extent that this goal has been obtained. Furthermore, subjects who were not instigated to aggress were not expected to counter-aggress.

Subjects

Forty eight male undergraduates at Princeton University served as subjects. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in a two (attack vs. no-attack) by three (relevant vs. irrelevant vs. zero power enhancement) factorial design.

Procedure

Subjects received either an insulting (attack) or non-insulting (no-attack) evaluation from a confederate on an essay composition task (S. Worchel, Arnold, and Harrison, 1978). Prior to being given an opportunity to aggress against the essay evaluator, the subject engaged in a problem-solving task that either enhanced his power relative to the evaluator (i.e. relevant power) did not affect his position of power (i.e. zero power) or enhanced his power relative to a third individual (a confederate) who had not been involved in the initial evaluation task (i.e. irrelevant power).

After the problem solving task was completed, the subject gave the evaluator a critique of his work assignment and overall personality (Konecni and Doob, 1972). These measures served as the indices of aggression.

Results

The results of the experiment provided support for the hypothesis derived from power restoration theory. As predicted, the two groups that exhibited the lowest levels of counteraggression were the no-attack subjects and those who had been attacked and had been given power over the provocateur. Subjects who had been given no power over the provocateur were the most aggressive. (See Table 1).

Furthermore, support for the notion that a general form of power enhancement can deter counteraggression was to some extent demonstrated. The attack subjects who received irrelevant power tended to be less aggressive than the attack subjects

who had been given no power enhancement, but more aggressive than subjects who had been given power over their provocateur.

Implications and Conclusions

The results of the experiment provide firm support for power restoration theory. Moreover, evidence that an individual's desire to counteraggress can be reduced by obtaining power over the attack instigator, conflicts with explanations of the phenomenon that do not view power enhancement as being involved in the counteraggressor's pursuit. Thus, the results of the experiment call into question theories of aggressive behavior that advocate that individuals counteraggress, for example, to harm the aggressor, ventilate anger, or return harm because harm has been received (Berkowitz, 1962; Buss, 1961, Gouldner, 1960).

In addition to suggesting a new definition for counteraggressive behavior, the present research suggests that a response to an attack need not be an aggressive one. In this experiment, subjects were deterred from counteraggressing by being given a non-violent form of power over the attack instigator. Thus, a means for preventing the escalation of interpersonal conflict is at hand.

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Table 1
Mean Primary Counteraggression Scores*

Power Enhancement			
	Relevant Power Enhancement	Irrelevant Power Enhancement	Zero Power
Instigation to Aggression			
Attack	22.1 bc	26.4 ac	31.4 a
No Attack	23.0 bc	21.4 bc	19.7 b

*Note: cell n = 8. Larger means indicate more counter-aggression. Cells not sharing a common subscript differ at the .05 level or less by two tailed t-test.